

Message: "Burdensome Blessings" - 2-1-26

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

5When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
3"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Recently, there was an article in the national news reporting on comments made by The Reverend Rob Hirschfeld who is Bishop of the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire. He made his comments at a vigil honoring Renee Good, the young mother and American citizen who was fatally shot in Minneapolis on January 7th by a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Officer, otherwise known as ICE. Bishop Hirschfeld's comments centered on his warning to clergy that they need to prepare for "a new era of martyrdom." He asked the clergy under his authority to finalize their wills and get their affairs in order to prepare for the new era of potential sacrifice.

Here are Bishop Hirschfeld's exact words spoken at the vigil: "I have told the clergy of the Episcopal diocese of New Hampshire that we may be entering into that same witness (of past martyrs), and I've asked them to get their affairs in order, to make sure they have their wills written, because it may be that now is no longer the time for statements, but for us with our bodies, to stand between the powers of this world and the most vulnerable."

I had three immediate reactions to his message.

For one, I'm so glad I'm not in the Episcopal church! And that I do not practice ministry in New Hampshire! And that I'm not under Bishop Hirschfeld's authority! They've got it tough out there in New England, with the Bishop asking for pastors to prepare for possible martyrdom - I've checked my job description as an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, even the fine print, and I do not see martyrdom as a requirement - Whew! I'm REALLY glad I'm Methodist!

My second reaction immediately followed the first, and it was 180 degrees the opposite - for indeed, I may not fall under the authority of the Bishop of New Hampshire, but I do fall under the authority of the one he falls under as well - namely, we both fall under the authority of Jesus, of God and God's call upon our professional capacity as God's representatives. Pastors and Bishops are not called to intentional martyrdom in their institutional roles, but they are called to possible martyrdom as they follow Jesus. In fact, this is old news; we've always been called to possible martyrdom if Jesus leads our lives; After all, was there not a cross involved in following Jesus? And did not Jesus invite us to take up our own crosses, possibly meaning something more than a metaphorical reference?

Which leads me to my third and final reaction, which is this: how do I tell you this? "Follow Jesus and suffer"....that's a heck of a depressing sermon title. "Follow Jesus and suffer" -- What kind of message is that? How do I tell you that the faith we all share may indeed lead us into suffering, danger, risk, pain, and, yes, even death? How do I preach such a negative message? Especially in these days where the suffering of so many is so great?

Our scripture passage for today is timed perfectly for this matter - yet it may not seem so at first. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount of course, otherwise called the Beattitudes. It's a remarkable passage which is one of the most popular scriptures in the Bible. Why it is so popular is that it mentions again and again the word "blessed." We like that word, it seems, we like blessings, we like good things coming into our life. And we have come to understand blessings as pretty much defined by overtly good things - things that please us, comfort us, energize us, calm us, encourage us, and nurture us. Blessings speak of things like maypole dances and banquet feasts, of puppy dogs and purring kittens, of laughing children and loving neighbors, of new motorcycles and winning football teams. But our definition of the word "blessing" is much narrower than what Jesus intended - and this passage brings this to light.

Now, I've tried sandpaper, lotions, chamois cloths, buffing compounds, and all sorts of softening agents on this scripture passage, but if you read it closely there's not really any way to soften the heart of its message, is there? Although, interestingly enough, when one reads the beatitudes, one gets a sense of a soft message inside, about blessedness and comfort and inheritance and abundance, but these things are present IN THE MIDST OF things that are terribly harsh - things like poverty of spirit, mournfulness, persecution, revulsion, being slandered, and meekness. These are not pleasant human experiences. Even the things that

sound comforting or soft, such as being merciful towards others or being a peacemaker or being pure in heart are things that don't come easy - for instance, have you ever tried to forgive someone who really hurt you, or shown mercy to someone who terribly wronged you? Have you ever tried to work peace between two warring individuals or groups, maybe even between family members at odds with each other? Have you ever truly achieved purity in heart and avoided all temptations, small and great, outward and inward? Have you ever hurt so bad inside, or for that matter, outside, broken-hearted or broken-bodied, that you questioned God, or even cursed God? Where is the blessing in these things? What does it mean that Jesus says "blessed are they" who hurt so badly?

Again, it is not that these traumatic conditions of life are themselves blessings; it is that those who experience these conditions can nonetheless be blessed while they are in the midst of such suffering. Do you hear the difference? Can you sense the truth here? That sometimes, maybe even often, we may find ourselves in the midst of great trauma or life-threatening illness or ICE agents working their terror AND YET discover blessedness in the darkness, the blessedness that embodies a hidden strength and resilience and potential to move the needle on hope for a better world?

Many are the preachers and parishioners who have tried to only draw comfort from this passage, and comfort is indeed present here. But the comfort offered is inseparable from the deepening struggles of life that hit us all eventually; the comfort is found in the midst of the struggles that come into our lives, not in their absence. And please note something important here -- that this passage is descriptive, not prescriptive; it is a huge mistake to believe that if one invites suffering one will be blessed. We are never expected to seek out martyrdom or suffering; but we must understand that following Jesus is a risky thing to do, that following Jesus will almost certainly involve suffering we cannot exactly anticipate nor plan for in advance. But the same holds true for blessing, that following Jesus will include blessings we cannot foretell, and grace we can never command. Put another way, following Jesus never guarantees any particular outcome; it only guarantees the presence of Jesus regardless of any outcome.

Jesus presses the point here that blessings are not always soft; sometimes to be blessed is to be in the middle of harsh reality or cold suffering or heated animosity and discover the things that otherwise would be missed. Challenges in life have the tendency to raise our awareness of what truly matters and what does not; pain is a great revealer of the trivial and an amplifier of the meaningful;

suffering deepens dependency upon grace, God's grace, the grace of others towards us, the grace we extend to those in need; brokenness makes one profoundly appreciative of healing and raises the bar on empathy; deep sorrow understands the value of what has been lost in reference to what remains. It might sound strange to call such things blessings, but think of what they give to life that nothing else can - the gifts of grace unearned, of gratitude reawakened, of awareness heightened, of life better understood and embraced as it really is. It makes the point we all know in our human experience - that some things, many things, are worth suffering for. Such things work hope where nothing else can.

There is something brewing in our nation today that carries the overtones of what I think Jesus was trying to get across to us when he mentions blessings and sufferings together. Have you heard of the term "neighborism?" As one who regularly makes up my own words for things, I have great appreciation for the practice so long as it conveys truths worthy of life - and this one certainly does. It's a word being used in Minneapolis presently, a term Minnesotans and others are using to speak about resistance to what is going on with ICE's heavy-handed tactics that are tearing apart families and communities. I did the AI thing and looked up a summary of the term - and even AI had trouble with its definition as it is such a new word. Here's what it said: "Neighborism" is a, likely,, 2026-era, term for an ideology focused on protecting and supporting nearby residents, regardless of background. It emphasizes building local,, resilient communities through mutual aid, trust, and, shared humanity. It acts as a,, community-based, alternative to, individualistic or, exclusionary,, viewpoints." In other words, neighborism refers to a commitment to protect people around you no matter who they are or where they come from, to protect them even at a cost to one's own self. Do you hear the sacrificial overtones? Do you hear the greatest commandment to love God and love neighbor as yourself? Do you hear the presence of God powerfully in play as such love becomes the center of our lives? Do you sense the blessing in the midst of risk, and danger, and violence, blessing not only for those being protected, but also those doing the protecting?

Do you hear the great commandment in that term "neighborism?"

There are many challenges before us as people of faith, challenges that will nonetheless have blessing in the midst of them. We must trust this if we are to work hope in the midst of despair; we must trust this if we are determined to follow Jesus. For Jesus is there on the streets of Minneapolis, eyes reddened by tear gas; Jesus is there clinging to a boat off Venezuela having just been bombed;

Jesus is there in the rubble of Gaza, and in the devastation of Ukraine, wondering where the next bomb will go off; Jesus is there in the silent suffering of the millions of refugees some nations have cast out and others refuse to receive; Jesus is there with the homeless individual trying to stay warm on a cold Missoula night. And Jesus asks for our company. There is no guarantee what blessing looks like in those areas where Jesus is found, but it is there in the midst of the pain; in order to see it, we must be there too - and if we are there with Jesus, perhaps it is only then that we really understand what "blessed" means.